

An Example of Godly Life
August 20, 2023: The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment
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May Your Word only be spoken; and may Your Word only be heard; in the name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

Perhaps you've had the experience of being on the phone with your insurance company regarding a medical claim. You've been put on hold for a long time as you wait to hear whether it will be covered or not. You've been told initially that it is not covered. You ask to speak to a supervisor. You're put on hold for another 45 minutes. Then the call is dropped. Recall the frustration, the desperation, the rage, even, that you may have felt.

If you read our own Bird Treacy's *Wiggles and Wonder* Substack this week, you'll know that she writes that her experience with the American medical establishment has sometimes mirrored the unflattering picture that we have of Jesus this morning.

The story of this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is, for me, one of the most disturbing episodes in Jesus' ministry. What's a preacher to do? What's a person who is seeking to be a faithful follower of Jesus to do? What do we do when the Collect for today says, "Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us ... an example of godly life?" What kind of example is this?

You may recall that one of Matthew's main purposes is to show how Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures. Accordingly, Matthew quotes liberally from the Hebrew Bible. He wants to introduce Gentile Christians to the powerful Jewish traditions from which Jesus came, and into which they are being grafted. And, he wants to reinforce for Jewish followers of Jesus the idea that he fulfills Biblical prophecy. According to the Biblical narrative, Canaanites were idolatrous pagans driven from the land that God had promised the Israelites during their time in the wilderness. The Canaanite was the ultimate outsider.

Now, it is important to note what precedes Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. In the first part of the Gospel reading this morning, Jesus summarizes for the disciples his response to yet another clash with the religious authorities. In this instance, it concerns dietary practices. Jesus maintains that they have twisted life giving religious traditions into a tool for social control and exclusion. He has just, in one fell swoop, declared dietary practices, like washing one's hands, to be optional. What proceeds *from* the mouth, rather than what goes *into* the mouth, Jesus asserts, is what disrupts the relationship with God and neighbor.

After this pronouncement, for unnamed reasons, Jesus heads off with his disciples in northwesterly direction, away from the Sea of Galilee, toward non-Jewish territories, where he will, undoubtedly, encounter non-Jewish people. Enter the Canaanite woman. What will he do?

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Jesus' initial response to her desperate entreaty is... silence. "He did not answer her a word." (Matt. 15.23)

What is going on in his head? In his heart? He has just taken the religious authorities to task for a narrow, exclusive view of who falls within the reach of God's love and mercy. Right here, right now, will he walk the walk of spacious inclusion that he has just preached?

As far as I can tell, the story is the only place in the Gospels where Jesus seems plain old mean. We were talking about this passage in the Men's Prayer Group this week, and someone said, "It's like Jesus telling her, 'Sorry, you're not in network. It's going to cost you a bit more.'"

Interpreters throughout the ages have tied themselves in knots trying to airbrush away the harshness of this picture.

We're asked to imagine the facial expressions and tones of voice of both Jesus and the woman, and to imagine they are engaged in a teaching session for the benefit of the disciples. In this interpretation, the disciples are being guided into a broader understanding of the reach of Jesus' mission. Jesus and the woman already understand this but are playing this game to convince the disciples. That seems like a stretch to me.

Other commentators try to soften the encounter by pointing out that the Greek word for "dog" that Jesus uses actually means something more like "puppy" or "lap dog." Still... a dog is a dog, and—apologies to dog lovers—it is still an insult the likes of which you might hear in a high school hallway.

Others say that Jesus was exhausted, or that he was treating a non-Jewish woman the way any other Jewish man would have in the first century. We should expect more from Jesus, no?

And yet, if we persist in trying to soften the hard edges of this passage, we may not reap the fruits of wrestling with how Jesus is, in this encounter, "an example of Godly life."

This story takes seriously what the Nicene Creed has taught for centuries: that Jesus was fully human and fully God. In his full humanity, Jesus embodied all that we are, and yet also lived fully in harmony with the will of God.

I think of times that, as a parent, I have been approached by my children for something. My kneejerk reaction is "no," for what I think are the best of reasons. And yet, in the deep recesses of my heart, I feel a "yes" struggling to make its way out. As the conversation sometimes goes, the ice around my heart melts away, and the "yes" breaks through. A wall tumbles down, a connection is made, healing happens.

I wonder if something like that is happening for Jesus. In his initial silence, is something growing, shifting?

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Or I think of the years which I personally opposed the ordination of openly gay and lesbian persons. More than 30 years ago, I served on the Vestry in a parish in the Diocese of Rhode Island. We had the responsibility of endorsing candidates who sought ordination under the care of our parish. One such person, I'll call him Richard, had confided in me the truth of his orientation. The Bishop of Rhode Island at that time was known to be supportive of LGBT candidates, in a way that the Diocese of Massachusetts at that time was not, nor the rest of the Church. It was not unusual for gay people interested in the priesthood from Massachusetts to come to Rhode Island, join a parish, and then apply for ordination.

In any case, Richard shared with me the truth of who was. And he asked that I not introduce that truth into the Vestry's deliberations. I struggled. In the end, I decided not to say anything, but my heart had not yet been converted. That would take a few more years, more experience, more reading and praying, more work of the Holy Spirit.

While it took me years to change with regard to that particular issue, the Canaanite woman in this story has the effect of accelerating change in Jesus' heart. In the space of a few lines of scripture—starting with his stunned silence—by her persistence, her knowledge of his religious tradition, her wit, her absolute dedication to the health and well-being of her child—she persuades him that God's mercy is wider even than Jesus, at the point, can even imagine.

How is this an example of Godly life?

Jesus accepted the challenge of walking the talk. Jesus was always open to learning the wideness of God's mercy. Jesus was faithful to God's call even in the complexity and messiness of human life. Jesus was willing to change, even to be wrong—dare I say it—to stay faithful to God's will for all people. Jesus kept learning what it meant to be Jesus, just like we must keep learning what it means to be the people whom God is calling us to be. d

Amen.